

Leveraging Resources and Sustaining Partnerships in Tough Economic Times

**Cheryl N. Booth
Shruti J. Vaidya,
Patricia A. Farrell
Janet L. Bokemeier**

Abstract

During times of economic uncertainty, how can universities develop and sustain resources for engagement efforts? This article focuses on how a university-wide research and outreach coalition at Michigan State University called Families and Communities Together (FACT) is exploring a variety of funding approaches and implementing successful strategies for supporting engagement. By making the best use of its collaborative and multidisciplinary structure, by demonstrating impacts and maintaining visibility, and by building long-term partnerships, the coalition has been successful in forging alliances with government and nonprofits, sharing resources, and sustaining funding for engagement work.

As state governments across the nation struggle with budget shortfalls, institutions of higher learning are coming under increasing pressure to justify their value to the public. Although the demand for higher education is increasing, with applications to universities on the rise, government support for education is dramatically decreasing (*Fish 2003; Weerts 2000; Commission on National Investment in Higher Education 1997*). Public and land-grant universities, in particular, are battling public perceptions that they are not accountable enough to parents, students, and taxpayers and are redoubling their efforts to demonstrate the university's relevance and societal contributions.

During such times of economic uncertainty, developing and sustaining resources for engagement efforts present major challenges for both universities and communities. In Michigan, major reductions in state aid for higher education along with public resistance to further tuition hikes are resulting in severe funding losses across programs at state universities. Similarly, community partners are burdened by economic pressures and can commit limited resources to collaborative work. In the face of such challenges, a

university-wide coalition at Michigan State University (MSU) is maintaining its commitment to support multidisciplinary research and build campus-community collaborations.

The MSU Families and Communities Together (FACT) Coalition is expanding the range of strategies that university outreach and engagement initiatives typically use to strengthen resources. The coalition has been successful in forging alliances with government and nonprofits and cooperatively sharing resources by making the best use of its collaborative and multidisciplinary structure, by demonstrating impacts and maintaining visibility, and by building long-term partnerships. Using lessons learned from the coalition's experience, this article focuses on successful strategies for strengthening internal and external relations, creating new alliances, and sustaining funding for engagement work.

The Coalition Model

Michigan State University designed the FACT Coalition to be both responsive to needs in the state and supportive of university scholarship on children, youth, and families. The FACT Coalition supports multidisciplinary research and scholarship, fosters innovative campus-community collaborations, and serves as an information hub and point of access to university resources. The coalition builds on the progressive efforts made at Michigan State University over the past decade to prioritize outreach at the administrative level, to integrate outreach into the mission of departments across campus, and to support interdisciplinary efforts that can address complex social issues (*Vortruba 1996; Sandmann 1996; Lerner and Simon 1998; Provost's Committee on University Outreach 1993*).

Sponsored by the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station (MAES), MSU Extension (MSUE), and the Office of the Provost, FACT is not based in any one disciplinary unit but rather functions as a virtual entity that integrates research, outreach, and extension across campus and throughout the state. By linking strong science and effective community engagement (*Simon 1999; Fitzgerald 2000*) through partnerships, rather than housing research within a single department, the coalition is proving to be a successful model for coordinating and leveraging the work of units across the university. The coalition model also allows funds to be invested primarily in research and engagement efforts rather than in building infrastructure (*Booth et al. 2003*).

Institutional support at the highest level of the university, a broad network of stakeholders, grassroots coalition building, and a base of power across the campus have been key to its success (Keener 1999; Rosaen, Foster-Fishman, and Fear 2001; Skivington 1998; Simon 1999). Maintaining this internal support over time, especially in the current fiscal climate, has required a devotion of resources and a deliberate commitment to cultivating positive stakeholder relations. Seeking active guidance from a diverse advisory group of administrators, faculty, extension staff, and community partners, communicating consistently and strategically with sponsors and partners, and documenting the impact of FACT's efforts have proved to be valuable strategies for maintaining institutional commitment.

Benefits of a Collaborative and Multidisciplinary Structure

FACT's collaborative, interdisciplinary structure allows for shared credit as well as ownership and commitment across campus; it is a key to advancing partnerships and sharing resources to sustain engagement. Eschewing a "single, controlling sponsor" (and relying on a broader base of financial support) has been identified as a critical condition for universities to enter into truly collaborative partnerships with community groups (Rainaley 1998). While funds pooled from the sponsors form the crucial base of the coalition's efforts, including competitive and targeted grants, faculty work groups, and other collaborative opportunities, FACT is finding new ways to further its work in the face of economic realities. The coalition has forged new alliances with state agencies, developed focused projects that respond to community needs, and explored and implemented new funding strategies. This purposeful process has led to an expansion of internal and external supports that forward engagement work and help MSU respond to the needs of Michigan families.

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FACT's collaborative structure demonstrates an ongoing, broad-based institutional commitment to engagement and has

several strengths. By sharing indirect costs across departments and getting joint credit for projects, FACT supports work across the entire university, encouraging partnerships between depart-

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ments and interdisciplinary efforts. Through this collaborative cost- and credit-sharing model, the coalition is demonstrating how interdisciplinary efforts not only allow the campus to address a diverse range of social issues but also help to "mobilize broader bases of political and financial support" (Walshok 1996). The shared commitment has helped to buffer and protect coalition funding in the midst of university-wide budget cuts—rewards and

costs are distributed and shared among partners. Also, the coalition has used its flexibility to fund MAES and MSU Extension faculty, as well as others, allowing it not only to leverage MAES's campus research base but also MSUE's eighty-three-county network across the state.

Demonstrating Impacts and Maintaining Visibility

To sustain support for effective engagement efforts, scholars and university leaders have emphasized the importance of tracking and documenting the impact of outreach and engagement efforts not only in terms of scholarship, but especially in relation to communities and the state (Ramaley 1998; Skivington 1998; Walshok 1996; Weerts 2000). The FACT Coalition has placed priority on communicating with its internal and external stakeholders in order to maintain visibility for engagement efforts and build a strong public identity. Strategic communications efforts are helping to create political leverage for the university by demonstrating that funds coming into the university for research and outreach work have a direct impact on Michigan communities.

FACT uses a variety of avenues to document impacts and share research-based information with professional and general audiences, including seminars, publications, media relations efforts, and a searchable Web site. In spring 2003, FACT held a

forum to address obesity, a critical health and social issue in Michigan. A policy paper describing recently sponsored research focused on obesity as a social concern was released at the forum as well as distributed to state legislators. The event was webcast over the Internet and brought together faculty from medicine, nursing, kinesiology, food science, education, and extension with agency and community partners, like schools, and the departments of education and health. By pursuing broad media coverage, following up with a feature story in FACT's research and policy magazine, and maintaining obesity-related resources on the Web site, the effort is demonstrating MSU's significant research, outreach, and extension contributions to statewide and local efforts to address obesity in Michigan and is leading to stronger partnerships with the state.

This type of multifaceted approach to communicating with policymakers, professionals, scholars, and community members not only documents the substantive impact of university efforts on the citizenry, but also counters perceptions about higher education's lack of relevance and responsiveness and raises awareness about how university resources and knowledge positively contribute to the well-being of the state. Such strategic communications efforts have value internally at the university, because they recognize, promote, and reward faculty efforts (*Holland 1999; Keener 1999; Driscoll and Sandmann 2001*), as well as externally, because they develop and solidify strong relationships with the state, which could impact future fiscal decisions. The coalition's experience with such efforts is confirming that documenting the impact of strong outreach scholarship and program efforts can be an important and viable fund and resource development strategy.

Building Sustainable, Long-Term Partnerships

The FACT Coalition supports partnerships that are multidisciplinary and integrative, that demonstrate shared mission and power, and that have specific plans for future funding and sustainability. The most successful projects have included: an authentic commitment between partners; methods that ensure that the community is cooperatively engaged and has an equal voice in the project; a focus on being responsive to pressing societal issues; and an effort to find common ground between the needs of faculty (research, grants, scholarly development) and community needs—finding ways to define both a community problem and a research problem. Projects that are based on such

principles not only result in effective community engagement and long-term collaboration (Lerner and Simon 1998; Sockett 1998; Votruba 1996) but also have the potential to lead to lasting systems reform and change (Ramaley 2003). FACT has found that a fundamentally strong partnership provides the basis for exploring new fiscal options and pursuing creative approaches to sustain the collaborative effort.

Universities have typically relied on funding strategies such as government budget allocations, contracts and grants with public and private agencies, grants from private foundations, and fees for direct service and tuition. The FACT Coalition has attempted to explore alternative strategies that build on the fundamentals of strong partnerships, including innovative alliances with state agencies and private foundations, sharing resources and expertise, leveraging funds, sharing costs internally across the university, and targeting small, seed projects that show great promise.

Examples of Partnerships

Leveraging and Matching Funds: To counter the notion that community engagement projects are only service oriented and/or philanthropic in nature, partnerships that generate matching funds demonstrate that outreach efforts can be self-sustaining and economically viable. Working with the Michigan Department of Community Health, MSU Extension is piloting a program called "Make Health Your Choice." Project staff train paraprofessionals to help Medicaid-eligible recipients take control of their own health through a behavior change program that focuses on nutrition and healthy lifestyles to prevent and manage chronic diseases, such as Type II diabetes. Another project developed by the College of Nursing focuses on a family intervention program to reduce unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases among the adolescent Medicaid population in Michigan. Both of these projects are intended to develop cost-effective best practices that will promote healthy lifestyles.

Sharing Resources and Expertise: Based on its collaborative model, FACT has also sought opportunities to promote partnerships that may not pool fiscal resources but have provided opportunities to share expertise and other resources across units and agencies. When the Institute for Health Care Studies within the College of Human Medicine negotiated a new data-sharing arrangement with the Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH), FACT partnered with the Institute to extend the agreement to faculty with-

in the College of Social Science. The agreement provides faculty members with access to a large database in Michigan in exchange for their help with specific data and/or policy analysis needed by the state. While not providing fiscal resources, the agreement benefits both parties by providing faculty in diverse colleges with streamlined, quick access to data on health, population, families, and other key indicators, as well as providing agencies with timely analysis on topics important to the state. It is a creative approach to exchanging resources that have mutual benefits for both faculty and state partners.

Targeting Seed Projects:

FACT has seen some of the best outcomes emerge from projects that were awarded relatively small, targeted amounts of seed funding for a promising idea that had the potential to set the stage for future work. A partnership between the College of Osteopathic Medicine and several urban public schools in Michigan was awarded seed funding to develop a research-based program called Osteo-CHAMPS. It is

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an effort to reduce racial inequality in the health sciences by introducing medical concepts and stimulating interest in this profession among underrepresented and disadvantaged high school students. The project has successfully leveraged FACT's initial investment fivefold through additional grants, built valuable partnerships, and expanded its program, which includes a residential summer course, admissions seminars, and mentoring efforts, for students across the state.

Targeted funding has become an important coalition strategy for allowing a project team to explore a new approach to research and programs while limiting the amount of dollars exposed to risk. The smaller funding amounts also allow the coalition to seed several projects at a time and test a variety of innovative ideas. Even with the limited resources, these projects have often resulted in further research grants, improved programs, and substantive outcomes for children and families.

Alliances for the Future: Supporting alliances across sectors, like philanthropy, business, government, and the university, is another way FACT has been able to leverage resources. The coalition is currently exploring ways to jointly sponsor projects with foundations in order to address both research and community programs. While foundations often focus on funding community-based programs, their efforts can benefit from and be strengthened by a strong research component and access to state-of-the-art best practice. Rather than relying solely on foundation support, FACT is exploring partnerships with foundations to jointly fund efforts that would build capacity within communities and among faculty to more effectively bring research to bear on priority issues.

FACT is also exploring stronger partnerships with the state through a project on early childhood literacy. While state priorities have centered on early literacy and school readiness, funding for new initiatives has declined dramatically. To address this gap, FACT has convened a diverse group of experts from education, human ecology, extension, and communications to offer university resources and expertise on developing programs that will help meet state mandates, such as a new licensing requirement for thirty minutes per day of emergent literacy activities in child care centers. The group is also developing educational materials and tools for parents, providers, and volunteers to improve children's school readiness. By investing in this effort, the coalition is helping to demonstrate the university's capacity to provide expertise and respond to state needs in a timely manner. It also builds a foundation for collaborative work and long-term partnerships with state agencies that have the potential to secure resources for the university in future years.

Lessons Learned

The coalition has learned valuable lessons through its efforts to develop strong sustainable partnerships. First, there is a large time investment required to build and sustain meaningful partnerships, and the coalition's limited infrastructure poses special challenges, including competition for administrators' time and a lack of a departmental base for funding. There is also difficulty in finding appropriate funding at the university for community-based research and outreach—FACT addresses this by reaching out on behalf of faculty, and advocating for faculty rewards and incentives that will more easily allow them to participate in engagement efforts (*Driscoll and Sandmann 2001; Keener 1999, Mackinnon-Lewis*

and Frabutt 2001). Finally, there is a need to negotiate the differing cultures of campus, government, nonprofits, and communities.

We have also learned that the best outcomes have emerged from projects in which there is a balance between faculty and community priorities. With this in mind, FACT serves an important role as a catalyst for partnerships and a broker between the university and communities. Whenever possible, the coalition also attempts to recruit distinguished scholars who have immediate expertise to share and can mentor junior faculty—this strategy underscores university responsiveness to social priorities and leads to a stronger commitment to the outreach and engagement mission.

The coalition has found that sustaining engagement efforts in an uncertain fiscal climate can be a challenging and arduous task. During tough economic times, it becomes even more imperative to document project impacts and the effectiveness of engagement efforts, to focus on building and maintaining meaningful partnerships with state agencies, organizations, and community groups, and to explore creative ways to exchange expertise and leverage resources. The coalition will continue to expand and test out different strategies for sustaining partnerships, and expects that engagement initiatives can best weather budget crises by building enduring social capital within the university, with community organizations, and across the state.

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About the Authors

- Cheryl Booth is the interim associate director for Michigan State University Extension (MSUE), state leader for MSUE 4-H Youth Development, and co-director of the FACT Coalition. Her twenty-three year career at MSU has involved work in numerous capacities, including administrative roles, building networks with campus and community partners, and working with extension professionals in the children, youth, and family area. She has degrees in human ecology and education and received her Ph.D. in agriculture and extension education from Michigan State University.
- Shruti Vaidya is the communications director for the FACT Coalition. She received her bachelor's degree in English and mathematics from Western Michigan University. Since the coalition's inception in 1999, she has developed its information and communications system and is the editor of Connect, FACT's new magazine and webzine for children, youth, and family professionals. She is currently interested in using multiple media in innovative ways to advance research partnerships and university engagement.
- Patricia Farrell is an outreach specialist with Michigan State University Outreach and the associate director for the FACT Coalition. She received her bachelor's degree from Wayne State University, a master's degree in social work from the University of Michigan, and a doctorate in educational administration from Michigan State University. Her current special interests are campus-community partnerships in K-12 and pre-school settings with an emphasis on health and community involvement.
- Janet Bokemeier is the associate director of the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station, co-director of the FACT Coalition, and professor of sociology at Michigan State University. She received her Ph.D. in sociology from Iowa State University. Her previous administrative positions include serving as the director of evaluation for MSU's Institute of Public Policy and Social Research and as professor and chairperson of the Department of Sociology at the University of Kentucky. Her scholarly interests include work, gender, family, and inequality in rural America.